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ABSTRACT

If teachers have the skills to successfully educate students without disabilities, then they can succeed in teaching students with disabilities who are included in regular education. Preservice level teachers need skills for successful participation in the daily routines of inclusive classrooms before they actually enter the regular classroom. Important qualities for success include: teacher organization, quality delivery of lessons, rapport, credibility, control, content, discussion, and well-designed activities to engage children. Preservice teachers must learn collaborative skills along with the existing content/pedagogical training. It is no longer acceptable for teachers to learn collaboration skills on the job, and teachers can no longer get away with a solitary approach to teaching. Preservice teachers need to develop strong interactional skills that encompass the ability to communicate with peers, parents, and students. They must also learn strategies for using parent-teacher conferences as opportunities to solidify collaborative relationships with families. Preservice programs must emphasize reflective thinking and teaching, encouraging teachers to be open-minded, wholehearted about teaching, and intellectually responsible. In the absence of collaborative skills, it will be far more difficult to ensure that all students are accepted and actively supported in accessing the full array of educational experiences available to them. (Contains 13 references.) (SM)

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ISOLATION TO INTERACTION: IMPLICATIONS FOR PREPARING PRESERVICE EDUCATORS

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Abstract

Teachers who successfully teach students without disabilities have the skills to successfully teach students with disabilities. This article presents additional skills needed by preservice level teachers before they enter the regular classroom. Preservice teachers must learn collaborative skills along with the existing content/pedagogical training in order to successfully meet the varied needs of students with disabilities placed in the regular classroom; the classroom which is becoming more commonly known as the "inclusion classroom."

Today, the inclusion movement is at the forefront of educational reform. It is unlike the 1980s Regular Education Initiative (REI), in which the relationship between special education and regular education was envisioned, suggesting the elimination of the special education eligibility requirement and allowing children to be placed in the continuum of educational placements (Will 1986).

The inclusion movement promotes a major difference. According to Stainback and Stainback (1992), Lipsky and Gartner (1991), and many others in the inclusion movement, it is deemed best that all children regardless of their disabilties or special needs be educated in the regular classroom. These advocates of inclusion further argue that the dual system of regular education and "pull-out" special education system be eliminated. Alternatively, a more coordinated and inclusive school-based delivery system involving the regular and special education teacher along with a multidisciplinary team are deemed more appropriate to meeting the educational needs of children with disabilities in the regular classroom.

Whether or not school systems are involved in full inclusion in which all students are educated in the regular class or some combination, preservice teachers are one group of people who will have tremendous impact on the system. It would be too late for them to acquire skills to work effectively in an inclusive and collaborative setting, on the job. It is imperative that during the teacher preparation program teachers learn skills appropriate for working as team members. Without specific collaborative training with other adults, the quality of education for students with diverse needs will at best be second-rate in the regular classroom.

In the future, it would be safe to predict that the regular classroom will be more diverse than a typical or regular classroom today. The focus, for preservice teachers, must be on learning skills necessary for successful participation in the daily routines of the inclusive classroom. No longer is the traditional approach of content knowledge and pedagogical training sufficient for the preparation of teachers. They need to know how to shift from role to role depending on the situation.

After five years of consulting with administrators, teachers, support personnel, alternative schools for children with special needs, professional special education organizations, and families grappling with concerns regarding the inclusion of disabled students, along with surveys in college courses for preservice teachers, the following are concrete skills to be considered in the preparation of preservice teachers for the complicated and diverse classrooms of tomorrow.

Effective Teaching Skills

It is critical to remind preservice teachers that "good teaching" is still just that and nothing can replace such teacher qualities as: organization, quality delivery of lessons, rapport, credibility, control, content, discussion and well-designed activities to engage children.

The concern by many regular education preservice educators is that they do not have the skills to teach children with special needs. On the other hand, preservice special education teachers may view the regular teacher as impeding the daily progress of students due to a lack of skill-based knowledge in working with children with disabilities. The preservice training program must teach preservice teachers how to overcome the traditional and narrow minded view that "regular"

education teachers do not possess the necessary skills to work effectively with these children. Furthermore, the special education preservice teacher must acknowledge the superior attitudes held by many special education teachers that the "regular" education teacher must depend upon them as consultants rather than partners in meeting the needs of the disabled child.

The bottom line is that we must continue to ensure that preservice teachers focus on learning effective teaching strategies and ways of teaching to a diverse student body. No one expects teachers to know all the specialize information about every disability, or to do everything that may be necessary for a student with disabilities.

Collaboration and Teaching

Traditionally, teaching has been thought of as an occupation that requires a lot of interaction with children and very little with other adults. It is not uncommon to hear teachers say "I am great with my kids but don't make me talk in front of my peers." Being comfortable with ones students is one of the cornerstones of teaching. However, no longer is it possible for teachers to get away with the solitary approach to teaching. In contrast, today's teachers must be comfortable working well with children and interaction well with teaching colleagues within the same environment.

The teacher education program must emphasize and teach the skills of collaboration. It is no longer acceptable for teachers to learn these skills on the job. Research conducted by (Friend & Cook, 1992) outlines the prerequisite skills the inclusion movement requires teachers to possess when they are hired. Teachers should already know how to participate in collaborative activities that include the following:

-one-to-one consultation between special education and regular classroom teachers,

-small teams of teachers working together,

-team-teaching, or co-teaching,

-working with related personnel or a multidisciplinary team.

Clearly, one way for preservice teachers to get early experience in the art of collaboration is through course activities that utilize role-playing, small group activities such as cooperative learning exercises and simulations. Field-based experiences should also include interaction with personnel working in inclusive school settings.

Preservice level teachers must be taught the rudiments for team-teaching as a basis of collaboration. They need exposure to the methods of setting up a team, an understanding of the challenges faced by teachers who team teach and an understanding of the responsibility of each person on the team. Finally, the power that a team has in presenting quality education should be stressed.

Developing Family-Oriented Teachers

How will I be able to help all these children without parental involvement and support? This is a common concern of the preservice educator and one worthy of in-depth attention in preservice training. However, it is more important that preservice teachers understand the barriers to family participation in schools than methods of increasing parental involvement.

A clear understanding of why some parents are not involved in the school in the way "teachers" expect them to be is significant in creating collaborative relationships with parents.

At the preservice level students who aspire to teach need to interact with family members as a regular part of their preparation—and not just when they are having a problem during formal conferences. From the outset, those who wish to teach need to begin working with families to develop an understanding of the valuable contributions families make to the successful school experiences of their children. Preservice teachers need to be exposed to the realities which impact parents reasons for lack of involvement in the school.

Lynch and Stein (1992) studied some of the reasons for poor parental involvement. Parents identified three barriers: logistics, communication, and misunderstanding by schools that give rise to feelings of inferiority and uncertainty about their child's special problems. An understanding of the reasons that prevent many parents from participating in schools will enable the preservice teacher to take proactive measures to ensure successful interaction with parents. Many misunderstandings can be prevented by practicing good communication skills.

Honing Interaction Skills

Developing strong interactional skills that encompass the ability to communicate with ones peers, parents and students is desirable for preservice teachers. The kinds of skills necessary to work successfully in the inclusive classroom must be exposed to students in the teacher education program because they exceed the rudiments of learned in speech or

communication courses. It is imperative that skills learnt in speech courses be strong enough to support the teacher in developing interactional skills.

According to Friends and Murdock (1996) there are two types of interactional skills necessary for successful collaboration in the inclusive setting. The first skill requires teachers to be strong in understanding non-verbal cues, to possess strong listening skills and collaborative language. In addition to these basic skills, teachers now must possess skills necessary to run effective meetings, respond to resistance to ideas and be able to persuade others. These skills require that teachers understand ho their tone of voice can encourage participation or cause people to withdraw. Furthermore, the art of asking questions and the ability to negotiate are also important.

Strong interactional skills cannot be underestimated in the inclusive classroom. The quality of the teacher's communication skills can greatly enhance the success of the student in the classroom, involve parents and enable positive conflict resolution to occur.

As preservice teachers learn to communicate effectively with their peers and hone interactional skills, the results can be transferred to collaborating with parents.

Family Conferences

Probably one of the most commonly used methods for interacting with parents is the parent-teacher conference. Yet, many teachers dread these meetings and many parents come away from these interactions with feelings less than worthy of partnership. At the preservice

level, teachers need to learn strategies for using these conferences as opportunities to solidify collaborative relationships with families. They need experiences that will allow them to confront their own stereotypes regarding families of students whose race, ethnicity, socioeconomic levels, or language differs from their own.

Reflective Teaching Practices

John Dewey (1933), the noted progressive educator, defined reflective teaching in terms of three specific qualities. First reflective teachers are open-minded. They are accepting of all students they teach and are flexible about how to work with them. Second, they are wholehearted. By this, Dewey meant that they are genuinely enthusiastic about their work, take a serious interest in it, and are aware of new reforms and developments that can aide them in their teaching. Finally, reflective teachers are intellectually responsible. By this, Dewey meant that teachers should be aware that their instructional decisions have consequences for the students they teach and teachers should take responsibility for those consequences. Collectively, these three qualities motivate teachers to evaluate their own teaching as a means of reaching a common goal.

As the inclusion movement continues to take hold in contemporary educational practice, it will become imperative that teachers working in collaborative settings take responsibility for the quality of teaching practices. An effective strategy for achieving on-going evaluation of the challenges regarding instruction, the quality of the collaborative teaching, and the needs of the students is through thoughtful reflection on the daily questions, challenges and problems that

arise. A reflective teacher is a growing teacher and one that will be able to adapt to the constant demands of working with the included students, peers, administrators, related personnel and parents.

Conclusion

Teacher Education programs have many responsibilities and not enough credits or time to address all of them. At the preservice level if the ideas presented in this article are not addressed in meaningful ways, then the numbers of beginning teachers will continue to plummet as teachers burn out early in their careers from the awesome responsibilities associated with the new politics of working in schools today. In the absence of collaborative skills, it will be far more difficult to ensure that all students not only are accepted in schools, but also are actively supported in accessing the full array of educational experiences available to them.

If the changes in teaching practice are to be successful, teachers in regular and special education alike will have to support each other by changing the way they have traditionally done their jobs. Research has shown that in a collegial, collaborative school environment, risk-taking and experimentation are far more likely to occur than in a school where the status quo prevails (Little, 1982; Rosenholtz, 1989).

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